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ABSTRACT

This paper uses case studies to introduce a method by which educators in a graduate course transformed the ways in which they saw the students with whom they worked as they situated themselves within the context of "at-riskness." Four white women, all of whom worked with at-risk youth, took a graduate course on the educational challenges of youth at-risk. They were required to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in which their views of being at-risk were informed by a range of respondents, including students, staff, teachers, and administrators. In many ways, these students had internalized the acceptable responses when asked to define being at risk, but they soon began to respond to teacher questions by separating their preconceptions from their actual belief structures. Another outcome of the process was that they began to learn from their students, undergoing a pedagogical transformation to increased respect for their students and a personal transformation through self-reflection. The case studies illustrate how critical ethnography as pedagogy creates opportunities for increased awareness of multiple identities as thinkers interrogate their own assumptions of the "other." (Contains 14 references.) (SLD)

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IT'S A FINE LINE . . . DECONSTRUCTING YOUTH AT-RISK: CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY AS PEDAGOGY

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IT'S A FINE LINE . . . DECONSTRUCTING YOUTH AT-RISK: CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY AS PEDAGOGY

Lacking knowledge of the communities in which students live, educators are paralyzed in their efforts to effectively educate individuals in their care (Cummins, 1986; Villegas, 1988; Erickson, 1987). While a company would not consider establishing a business or selling a product without intense study of the area, the customers, and the demand for the product, most educators enter schools ill informed, if not ignorant, of the surrounding community (Jehl & Kirst, 1992). This disjunction is most frequently attributed to middle-class teachers who work with low-income urban youth. Yet, in my teaching of graduate students who are teachers, principals, and health professionals, I have found their lack of knowledge of students' lives profound.

One way I attempt to strengthen the linkages between community and schools is to require action-based research of all my students, both undergraduate aspiring teachers and experienced educators returning for graduate study. Depending on the course, students conduct interviews with their students, parents and guardians of their students, community members, other educators, and/or social service agencies that serve youth. In this paper I introduce a means of intervention which served not only to transform the way educators view the community and students with which they work but also the way these educators situate themselves within the larger context of at-riskness. I use the case studies of four white women who work with at-risk youth. As seasoned educators in an advanced graduate course entitled, *The Educational Challenges of Youth At Risk: Deconstructing Drop-outs*, I required them to conduct ethnographic fieldwork whereby their views on "at-riskness" became informed by a range of respondents including students, staff, teachers, and administrators. As you will see, the research process required not only that the educators re-evaluate their assumptions of at-riskness but also engage their students in conversations in ways that none of these seasoned educators had experienced before. While the process proved transformative for all concerned, it was not without risks. Exploring "at-riskness" in any depth has the potential of unleashing personal pain and closeted memory; confronting questions of confidentiality and trust is essential to the work.

Transformative research as a form of critical pedagogy embraces engagement and accepts subjectivity. Interviewer and respondent move together in a reflective and reflexive dance. McDermott (1976) speaks of this process as people in interaction becoming environments for each other. While power indisputably remains in the hands of the researcher, s/he is also at the mercy of the informant (Fairclough, 1989). Authentic information flows only when trust is established. Demonstrating one's worth often comes at the risk of self-disclosure, something seldom welcomed in traditional research circles. Oakley (1981) recognizes the risk of personal involvement as "the condition under which people come to know each other and admit others into their lives" (p. 58).

One of the purposes of transformative research is to empower those interviewed by enabling them to reflect on their reasoning. Rist (1994) refers to this as the "enlightenment function" in contrast to the "engineering function." But with enlightenment comes recognition of one's condition and the possibility of acting upon this knowledge (Mishler, 1986). While some may question the role

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of action research. Macedo (1995), in a discussion with Freire, argues that "dialogue as a process of learning and knowing must always involve a political project with the objective of dismantling oppressive structures and mechanisms prevalent both in education and society" (p. 380). In this context the interviews themselves serve as an intervention (Luke, 1995). My hope was that through the process of extensive interviews with students, staff, administrators, community people, and parents regarding their attitudes and ideas on who drops out and why, my graduate students would not only learn about the phenomenon of at-riskness, but also transform the attitudes of those around them. By providing a safe space in which individuals speak in their own voices, Gee (1985) and McAdams (1985) claim that human beings come to make sense out of their experiences. Given the limited venues available for honest dialogue around substantive social issues, I see transformative research as a means to not only listen but to interrogate the reasoning behind assumptions that individuals hold.

Profile of student researchers.

During the 1994-1995 academic year I had the opportunity to teach in a new urban education program that attracted educators from a wide range of communities. While the local community is very diverse both in terms of socioeconomic class and ethnicity, the surrounding area is rural and has in recent years served as a bedroom community for professionals fleeing urban contexts. The course discussed here brought this contrast into vivid relief. All four of the students I selected to highlight in this article are veteran educators spanning a range of current educational roles. The settings for their interviews differed most dramatically from each other, providing valuable texture. Abby teaches first-grade in an inner-city school where the majority of students are low-income and African American. Dana, a high school principal, lives and works in a rural community that has been identified as safe from the dangers of the city but, as we will see, not safe from the dangers of being at-risk. Brenda, currently on leave from teaching high school for twenty years, took advantage of her contacts and freedom from employment responsibilities to speak with a wide range of people across the district. Cathy, an education specialist at the state mental health hospital, provided us with an important perspective; the voices she shared sobered us to the reality that our actions can lead to unpredictable consequences. All of the graduate students are white, female, and currently middle class though Dana and Brenda were raised in working-class homes and were first-generation college students.

The course.

I had four objectives for this course, to:

1. Demythologize the concept of at-riskness;
2. Define what contributed to students' apparent school failure;
3. Identify interventions and changes in traditional schooling that could prevent withdrawal from school; and
4. Get my graduate students in touch with youth and families who needed help.

Knowing that all but one of the students were full-time educators and had little time to study, I purposely paced the course to insure progressive and coherent quality work. I constructed a set of topics, inquiries and readings to guide their interviews throughout each week. My hope was that by having all students working with a similar population on the same questions but in different contexts, they would be able to provide multiple perspectives on "at-riskness." Weekly

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assignments required their personal responses as well as transcriptions of parts of the interviews that applied to the topic under discussion. The weekly instructions were as follows:
Week I. Examine your own assumptions on at-riskness. Where do these ideas come from? What experiences have shaped these views?
Week II. Interview teachers, counselors, administrators, janitors, etc. to find out how at-riskness is defined at school. For example, is it based on attitude, clothing, home environment, learning problems, and low grades?
Week III. Identify four or five at-risk students. Explain your reasons for the choice.
Week IV. Ask students in the class that you teach to define at-riskness and inquire as to their reasons.
Week V. Begin interviews with the students you identified as at-risk in Week III.
Week VI. Interview counselors and teachers regarding how the families of at-risk youth are perceived.
Week VII. Interview administrators as to what the school response is to at-riskness. Inquire about the relationship between at-riskness and dropping-out.
Week VIII. Having done this research, what do you see as a valid justification for kids staying in school?
As a final project, students compiled a reflective report on their research findings including the transformative process that each of them claimed they went through.

The results.
While the outcomes cluster into four general parts: interviewers' (student researchers') assumptions, staff responses, student responses, and reflection, in this article I discuss only two:
1. An examination of my students' assumptions on at-riskness and how this brought about a discussion of their personal encounters with marginality, and
2. A discussion of how the interactive, reflective interviews transformed the way the teacher researchers viewed their students, their teaching, and themselves.

First Outcome. Locating the self in marginality.
Masks of graduate student appropriateness melted quickly in this class when I probed under their veiled language of "at-riskness." Continually asking for the decoding of a particular word or idea, I realized that their first definitions of what it meant to be "at-risk" were far from what they really believed, and far from what they could testify. In many ways they had internalized the acceptable response to the pat question of "how would you identify at-riskness?" In order to proceed, I needed to know what stereotypes or experiences they were accessing. How much did they believe what they claimed? How open would they be to new definitions? With cautious constraint they began listing the typical litany of indicators for at-riskness: single parent, low income, visible minority status other than Asian, drugs and/or alcohol addiction, English as a second language, teen pregnancy, etc. For each comment I asked for further clarification and the basis of their knowing. It was not long before they joined me in the process, winnowing out their preconceptions based on the media from their actual belief structure.

I was concerned that some of them had come from sheltered, middle-class, monocultural backgrounds and might be jumping to conclusions regarding low-income children of color. My fear was only partially unfounded. As I read Abby's responses it became clear that she was

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definitely working with kids who were struggling. While I cringed at her accusation that "these children are victims of their home environment," she had numerous examples from her first-grade classroom to back up her assumption:

> Bobby lost his mother when his father shot her. Charmaine, a crack baby, lives with her mother who is a prostitute. Marimo has had trouble sleeping because of the constant ringing of gunshots in the neighborhood. Carrie, comes to school in dirty clothes that often smelled of urine. Rosie got lost walking to school alone on the first day of first grade. Jesse's mother had been in jail three times by the time he started school. Carla has asked for extra apples and oranges to take home because her mom sometimes forgets to buy food.

Abby writes, "I had no difficulty identifying four at-risk children to interview. I could have selected forty."

Without invalidating Abby's claims I wanted to broaden the definition of "at-risk." Coming from a small rural middle-class community to a low-income inner city school without any preparation for transitioning, Abby appeared trapped in a form of shell shock where every story confirmed her wildest nightmares. Since I had worked with white middle-class students who were severely at-risk and in alternative dropout programs, as well as with inner-city youth, I needed to provide her with some breadth. It was not long before the experiences of the other graduate students gave her new lens through which to view her situation. As the trust level increased, so did the revelations. Gradually, the women in the class challenged the traditional perception of at-riskness, citing cases of marginality within their own middle-class schools and communities. Their readiness to debunk the mythologies led me to wonder if these women themselves had tales that could match some of Abby's students' stories, but I had no idea to what degree I was correct.

One of the most reserved and conservative students, Cathy, lingered after the first class and thanked me for being so candid about my own life history and challenging them to see beyond the "masks of normality." She then, haltingly, revealed her own life of at-riskness within a family where appearances were of utmost importance. Raised in an elite, mid-western family, she was sexually abused as a child and sent to a psychiatrist at age four. Her father, a leading doctor in the Midwest, moved the family across country to the West Coast when she was ten years old. One week after settling into their new community, he committed suicide. All the funeral arrangements had been made prior to his leaving his old town. Cathy wrote,

> From that time on my life became a litany of at-risk behaviors: social phobia, molestation by a teacher, teen-age pregnancy, dropping out of school, early marriage, rape, drugs, and divorce. But what teacher would have called the quiet, good student from a perfect seeming home an at-risk child? I was not a threat to society. Few people, and no teachers, knew I was in pain. In my family we did not tell the truth; denial of truth, even to oneself, was like a virtue. Silencing often begins at home.

I asked Cathy if she would share her story with the class. She claimed she wanted to, and needed to, but was afraid. The next week she handed me a six-page paper and asked if she could read her version of children at-risk to the class. Head lowered, she read word for word. Never looking up, she did not see the tears on the faces of her classmates.

A watershed had been crossed. Over the next few weeks each of the other women in the class shared their tales of at-riskness. Brenda, a well-to-do executive's wife and veteran teacher, revealed that she has a son, Jonathan, who "puts us all at-risk, emotionally and physically." She wrote, "I have two definitions of the term at-risk: one of the textbook and one of the heart." Later in interviews with other educators who know her only as an outstanding, respected veteran teacher, she is constantly told, "These kids [at-risk] aren't like ours; they don't have intact families; there's no structure; they're poor, take drugs." In her heart she knew a different reality. One of her best friend's sons, Robert, is also severely at risk. Since his father was diagnosed with cancer having only four months to live, Robert has refused to function at school. Internalizing the anger and guilt, he has gone silent, his future precariously hinged on how he deals with the loss.

Dana, the fourth student researcher, represents a case of split siblings in which one is a socially acceptable success and the other is lost to society. As a first-generation college student, she moved through the local community college and regional normal school to return to teach and later become principal of the same high school from which she graduated. Her brother, on the other hand, followed a different track. She wrote, "It is difficult to believe that my brother and I were raised in the same family because our values concerning education are so opposite. My brother's attitude is that the world owes him something." Her concern lay not just in her brother's rejection of education but that in his marriage to a woman who left high school before graduating, they have set a pattern of oppositional behavior for their children who have already dropped out of school early in their teens. Frustrated with a sense of inadequacy, Dana's papers to me frequently revisited issues of guilt and impotence. When confronted with a marginalized student, she would ask herself, "Did I do enough? Where did I go wrong? How could I have averted the situation? Why didn't I see it coming?" I could not help but wonder how much she was projecting onto her students her own concern and confusion for her brother.

Second Outcome. Transformative Praxis. Perceptual Transformation.

While all of these student researchers had had extensive experience with youth, including those at-risk, nothing quite prepared them for the knowledge that they received during the interviews. Prior to this research they had been able to distance themselves from the realities of their students' lives through their *role* as teacher. Abby wrote of her experience.

> The interviews themselves were not shocking. These are my children. I knew their experiences before the interviews. I had been desensitized. It was not until I typed their voices into the computer that I let myself feel what was happening, what they go through every day. It is so important to remember how young they are [1st graders] and what lives they have led so far. They know so much.

Sitting down with students one on one provided a level of intimacy that dissolved the traditional barriers of hierarchy and power so often associated with teacher/student relations (Apple, 1982). Several of the student researchers confessed that while they teach students everyday, they seldom honestly talk with their students. They talked to them, disciplined them, cajoled them, and encouraged them, but they had not taken the time to sit down and talk with them in a context where the teacher became the learner, the listener.

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After learning that the vast majority of her respondents between the ages of 16-18 were working 25-30 hours a week, and that some were juggling two jobs, Dana wrote the following:

> Kids are not irresponsible; they are hyper responsible. These are the survivors. They have lived through experiences that I can't even begin to imagine and they have learned to accept their life, their past, and take each day as it comes.

Brenda came to a similar conclusion after several interviews with students who had dropped out. Their reasons for leaving had less to do with academic failure than with boredom or fear of returning to an unsafe, unfriendly environment. For some of the young women she interviewed the stigma of pregnancy was humiliating. One young woman dropped out at fifteen and is raising a family on her own. A male who left at sixteen now lives out of his car while earning his GED. Another lad, trying to support his wife and child at seventeen, just lost his minimum wage job at Pay and Pack due to downsizing.

The inmates at the mental health facility whom Cathy interviewed were a mere extension of the stories above. Ninety percent of her respondents claimed a direct connection between their K-12 experiences and their current condition. She wrote,

> My findings demonstrate that the mental and emotional problems that lead people to be committed to State Hospital begin during the school years and that the response of school personnel to these problems is harmful rather than helpful.

In hearing excerpts from some of the inmates' stories one cannot help but wonder how educators in the inmates' lives might have responded differently. Inmate 1 dropped out in the sixth grade. "I tried to return but the other students kept calling me 'retarded'." Inmate 2's current anger-control problem is the result of being badly mistreated at school on account of her facial disfigurement. Inmate 3 left school in the ninth grade because "the principal was a "bastard" who paddled people. #3 never learned to read. Inmate 4, who got his G.E.D. at State Penitentiary, transferred his skills from prankster to tough guy after a teacher scolded him in the seventh grade for playing the class clown. "He put me in the hot seat and it changed my life. I couldn't laugh after that; I was very shy. I didn't know how to talk to people." He was expelled for possession of a deadly weapon. Inmate 5's parents, both college graduates, had high expectations for their children before alcoholism scarred their sanity. Frequent fights and abuse brought their daughter to declare herself mentally ill by her senior year. She describes her life as "running in a maze."

Pedagogical Transformation.

During the interviews multiple transformations took place. Students became aware that their teacher was genuinely interested in what they had to say. Teachers realized that they had either been working from false assumptions about the students they had labeled "at-risk" or they had misinterpreted a child's call for help. Abby elaborated on this point.

> Interviewing gave me a chance to spend individual time with each student. Time is something that they desperately need. They felt important, as if their teacher really cared about them. Of course I do care, but often forget the importance of short talks with them. The interviews were important to show me that I can never forget where these kids come from. They come to school hurting and teachers must understand that. Interviews are important for every teacher with every student. After this assignment I began having "talks" with all my students.

One of the revelations that came out of this research was an increased respect for the opinions of youth, not only for the decisions that they made given the limited options available to them but also for their sophisticated social analysis. Most students understood the economic, political and social context that had placed their parents, and therefore them, at-risk. While the majority of the adult staff people interviewed blamed parents and the home life, the students did not. If anything, they felt their parents placed a very high degree of value on education. The reality that parents might not know how to translate this into support is a separate issue.

Similarly, in identifying the characteristics of youth at risk, the gap between adult perception and student perception was significant. Students were far more attuned to the subtle signs of at-riskness than the adults who were responsible for prevention and intervention. Adults used external factors such as clothing and hairstyles or apathy towards schoolwork as signifiers. Youth, in contrast, were quick to discredit these blatant characteristics, noting that it is often the "perfect student" who is most at-risk. As one young woman put it, "The eyes reveal the pain." Students had little use for the popular term "attention deficit," claiming that there is a fine line between those who choose to do the work and those who do not. Explaining the difference between her and a student at-risk, Michelle commented, "I do the work, even if it is dumb, they don't." Shocked by the realization that years of frustration and misinformation could have been alleviated had they created spaces to listen to their students, these educators began to reshape their pedagogy, increase their outreach to guardians, and rethink their priorities. All claimed that they could never again teach in the same way as they had done in the past. Dana wrote, "We have to listen to the voices of our students. In many cases they see the issues of at-riskness more clearly than the adults who are trying to find solutions." Abby came to the same conclusion, "To understand the school, the stories of the children must be heard."

Personal Transformation.

The opportunity to talk with students, staff, faculty, parents and community members through the screen of performing a required class assignment enabled these student researchers to access not only information to which they might not otherwise be privy but also to access silent or hidden parts of themselves. For most, this was the first time that they had been in such a powerful, yet vulnerable position. Inquiries, couched in the context of research, appeared less threatening to both colleagues and students. One of the researchers prefaced her interview questions to a group of sophomores by explaining that this was an assignment for her graduate class and stating, "I need your help with my homework." Students, taken by the idea that even their teacher was under the gun to produce results for a teacher, gathered around and offered their responses to questions of how one identifies students at-risk. Colleagues who previously appeared impervious or aloof offered up their frustration and suggestions; recalcitrant students willingly discussed their reasons for resisting the system; parents divulged their confusion and anger. Cathy who had remained in a relatively passive position at her job became an advocate for student rights. She intends to continue her research and pursue advanced training. In her final paper she wrote:

> In analyzing and responding to the demands for change, the objective, anthropological stance used in ethnographic research could be an approach that preserves my sanity. On-going research, analysis of observations, and frequent reflection will hopefully help me cope with the accelerating pace of change while retaining the positive influence I now have on students' lives.

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Abby claimed that one interview, in particular, provided her with a powerful reminder of why she became a teacher. In talking about her problems at school, Betsy, a first grader, shared with Abby that she had been "hurt" by "an uncle" but hadn't told anyone. Even though Abby knew that the girl had been molested before, she did not expect her to bring forth this information. The response did not relate to the question asked. The next day Betsy's mother came to school and Abby was called into the principal's office. The mother asked Abby what she had said to her daughter to get her to open up. Apparently, Betsy had gone home and told her mom that she and her teacher had had a talk and when the mother asked what about, she told her. The mother was grateful to Abby for creating a safe space for her daughter to speak candidly. She had long suspected that Betsy had been subjected to abuse and had noted a change in her daughter's disposition a year earlier but was unable to get her to talk about it. Abby said at the end of her reflective paper that week, "I had forgotten the enormous influence teachers can have on children's lives; Betsy reminded me. This is why I went into teaching."

The general consensus among my students held that perhaps what prevented educators from involvement in the lives of their students was a feeling of powerlessness: the awareness that simplistic quick fixes will not remove a child from poverty, from abuse, or from discrimination. Yet these student researchers concluded that their involvement had, in fact, moved them towards greater commitment. Knowledge of their students and the community gave them a strength and confidence they previously were unaware they could even attain. Upon reflection, one of them recommended that we provide more opportunities for teachers to access their students' lives. "Just as we allow for children to learn through small successes, we need to let teachers to do the same thing. Often we forget the impact we can have on children's lives. One way to help at-risk children succeed is to help "at-risk" teachers. The solutions for helping at-risk students exist in connection to the student's family.

Conclusion. I have illustrated how critical ethnography as pedagogy creates opportunities for increased awareness of our multiple identities as we simultaneously interrogate our assumptions of The Other. Interviews conducted by my graduate students for the class, *The Educational Challenges of Youth At Risk: Deconstructing Dropouts*, provide examples of how the research process itself created time and space for teachers to reconnect, reconstruct, and reprioritize their relationship with students, administrators and staff. I conclude with a discussion of three transformations that resulted from the research: perceptual, pedagogical and personal. Other applications of critical ethnography as pedagogy which have proven successful in my teaching include: preservice teachers placed in a variety of urban settings where youth and their families are served such as welfare offices, afterschool programs, food banks, and family planning agencies; veteran teachers conducting interviews during homevisits; and adult education students exploring the connection between stress at work and stress at home. Without an understanding of the complexity of the lives of youth, educators blindly create ineffective programs or place students at-risk. In all of the above cases, critical ethnography served as an intervention in opening up dialogue so desperately needed to move beyond misconceptions and misinformation of the Other. No matter how we crave clear demarcation lines between the infirm and the healthy, the incarcerated and the free, the rich and the poor, the young and the aged, we are all part of one continuum. Fear motivates us to maintain distance. Our comfort comes in separation from the reminders of that which we know is possible, if not inevitable, in our own lives.

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